



News Release

Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge

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Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge Announces Prescribed Burnings

Suffolk, Virginia— Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge staff and trained firefighters from other organizations will conduct prescribed burning at several locations in the refuge over the next several months. The refuge plans to burn approximately 875 acres, including one large block that will be ignited using a helicopter.

“Weather conditions and wind direction play a huge part in our decisions whether or not to light the match on any given day,” said Refuge Manager Suzanne Baird. “The most important thing here is safety – for our firefighters and for the public.”

The prescribed, or “controlled,” burns are carried out by trained personnel using approved tactics, and are planned and executed in coordination with other Federal, State and local agencies, including the Virginia Department of Forestry, Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, the North Carolina Division of Forest Resources and other nearby National Wildlife Refuges.

“We couldn’t pull this off without our partners,” said Baird. “We get help from the states of Virginia and North Carolina, our sister refuges, and The Nature Conservancy.”

Historically wildfires used to burn regularly in the Great Dismal Swamp, leading to a unique blend of forest types and wildlife habitats. However, suppression of wildfires, as well other human activities such the digging of canals, logging, and attempts at farming have radically changed the forest types in the Swamp. For example, remnant stands of pond pine and loblolly pine are threatened to be overtaken by young red maples that grow well in the shade. Using prescribed fire in these stands will maintain their pine character and prepare them to serve as reintroduction sites for the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker.

Another reason the staff conducts prescribed burns periodically is to keep forest fire fuels to a low level, especially in sensitive areas such as near buildings and in important habitats. If fuels are allowed to accumulate, the result is increased potential for a catastrophic forest fire and its resulting damage to homes, farms, and wildlife habitat.

“Here, even the dirt burns,” said Baird. “And in uncontrolled conditions, such as those you get with wildfire when the peat soil is at risk of igniting, that means a long hard battle and a lot of smoke before you get the fire out. That’s one thing we want to avoid.”

Fire is one tool used to accomplish the refuge’s mission of restoring the unique habitat characteristic of the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, which is part of the National Wildlife Refuge System administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. For more information, please contact Suzanne Baird, Refuge Manager, at 757-986-3705.